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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000747

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/28/2027

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: PM SINIORA RESOLUTE ON NAHR AL-BARID, MAKES FINAL  
PUSH ON TRIBUNAL

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (S) In a one-on-one 5/28 meeting with the Ambassador, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora speculated that the political will to "finish" Fatah al-Islam (FAI) had increased, not decreased, in the aftermath of Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's 5/25 televised address.

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He cited the March 14 sweep of the Doctors' Syndicate election as evidence that the public was disgusted with the Hizballah position that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) had to observe Nasrallah-defined "red lines" in fighting FAI. While he hoped the FAI fighters would surrender, Siniora said that, if not, he insisted that the LAF should "do what it takes" to end the FAI threat. Siniora expressed deep appreciation for USG delivery of ammunition, but he cautioned against the involvement of any USG military personnel in the operations against Nahr al-Barid. Such involvement would not stay secret, and, regardless of whatever military planning benefits must accrue, the political backlash might destroy his government. The Ambassador assured the PM that no such involvement was contemplated. On the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Siniora expressed confidence that, in a phone call the previous evening, he had persuaded South African President Mbeki to support the draft UNSC resolution. Immediately after his meeting with the Ambassador, the PM hosted the ambassadors of the nine UNSC members represented in Lebanon to make a final push for the tribunal's approval and to ask for their countries' support if military action in Nahr al-Barid becomes the only option for the Lebanese. Russian Ambassador Sergui Boukin was negative on both points.

He expressed his conviction that both the tribunal resolution and action in Nahr al-Barid will destabilize Lebanon, arguments that Siniora forcefully rejected.

SINIORA BELIEVES NASRALLAH'S SPEECH  
CONSOLIDATED PUBLIC OPINION -- FOR MARCH 14

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¶2. (S) The Ambassador met with PM Siniora in back-to-back meetings on 5/28 -- first, in a one-on-one session, and, second, when the PM hosted the Ambassadors of the nine Security Council members represented in Lebanon (e.g., P-5, Indonesia, Qatar, Italy, and Belgium). In the one-on-one

meeting, Siniora said that he is convinced that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's Friday night (5/25)

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speech had backfired. Nasrallah surely hoped that, by setting red lines for the LAF and "putting the LAF and Fatah al-Islam at the same level," he would destroy the political will to go after FAI in Nahr al-Barid.

13. (S) Instead, the PM said, both the Lebanese public and politicians are "disgusted." "They want rule of law. They want the army to win." Asked by the Ambassador how he gauged such public opinion, Siniora cited statements by Aoun bloc MPs supporting the army and distancing themselves from Nasrallah's red lines as well as the 5/27 elections in the Doctors' Syndicate. While a week ago March 14 leaders had as much as conceded losing the majority of the eight seats up for grabs in the Syndicate, in fact March 14 swept all the slate and also won the presidency of the Syndicate. (Note: In Lebanon, the heavily contested elections to syndicates are frequently cited as bellwethers of public opinion. End note.)

IF NO OTHER OPTION, SINIORA  
WILL BACK MILITARY ASSAULT  
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14. (S) Siniora said that he still wished for a solution to the Nahr al-Barid problem short of a military solution. "We are not in a hurry," he said (echoing something MP Saad Hariri had told the Ambassador earlier in the day). But, ultimately, if FAI fighters do not surrender, the LAF will have to "do what it takes" to root out FAI from the camp. He claimed that he will "insist" upon a military solution if that proves the only option. Siniora claimed to have been in "continuous contact" with PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who is "1,000 percent supportive of whatever decisions we take." He reviewed at some length efforts to

BEIRUT 00000747 002 OF 003

get civilians out of harm's way, estimating that about 5,000 civilians remained in the camp (up from UNRWA's estimate of 3,000).

APPRECIATION FOR U.S. ASSISTANCE;  
REQUEST THAT US MILITARY PERSONNEL STAY DISTANT  
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15. (S) Siniora expressed deep appreciation for the work that the USG has accomplished in rapid delivery of military assistance to Lebanon and the facilitation of assistance from others. He displayed a surprising (and surely newly minted) awareness of ammunition sizes and uses, noting that he would have to reach out to Turkey for some needed ammunition. In talking of the Egyptian contribution, the PM (channeling his long-time role as Finance Minister) griped that the Egyptians were inflating the nominal prices. While "beggars can't be choosers," he said that he had a responsibility to use the Saudi USD 100 million contribution for LAF supplies wisely. The Ambassador emphasized the need for the PM to draw down the Saudi money for the USG contributions as well, lest the new USD 220 million for the LAF in the supplemental assistance bill be exhausted quickly. Siniora was noncommittal, noting the need to discuss the accounting again later.

16. (S) Lowering his voice, Siniora also said that he wanted to put down his own red line for us. As grateful as he is for the assistance, the intelligence cooperation, and our facilitation with other donors, he wanted to make sure that the USG did not "get crazy ideas" about sending in special forces to help the LAF. In terms of military personnel, Siniora asked that the USG stay as far away from this fight as possible. While US military personnel might be able to offer advice and training that improves the LAF's performance, there is no way that, in Lebanon, such

assistance would remain secret. What the USG has been doing in terms of training for the LAF so far "is perfect." But "don't do anything special now." The political cost to Siniora's cabinet would be enormous, the PM calculated; "this could destroy us. Please understand how serious this is." The Ambassador responded that we are not contemplating such a move.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL: SINIORA  
BELIEVES SOUTH AFRICA NOW ON BOARD  
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17. (S) The Ambassador asked Siniora for an update on his lobbying efforts for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Siniora reported that he was making a final round of phone calls. He believed that, the previous evening, he had won over South African President Mbeki. Mbeki talked of how close South Africa is to Syria, and how, while South Africa supported the tribunal, South Africa believed that the Lebanese should adopt it themselves. Siniora recounted how he had built up a persuasive case to convince Mbeki that the UNSCR actually reflected the majority will of the Lebanese. Siniora expressed confidence that, now, Mbeki will instruct his delegation in New York to support the resolution. (Comment: We hope so. End comment.)

SINIORA SUMMONS UNSC AMBASSADORS  
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18. (C) In the subsequent meeting with the nine UNSC ambassadors, Siniora made a final push for adoption of the tribunal resolution. While he covered familiar territory at some length, he did so with passion. He then linked the Special Tribunal to the LAF's fight with FAI in Nahr al-Barid, describing FAI as another Syrian tool (in a series that included the closure of parliament and the recent bombs) that attempts to "sow doubt" in the minds of UNSC members. He complained that those who claim Lebanon will be destabilized by the tribunal resolution or a fight against FAI "seem to favor punishing the victim, not the perpetrators." Siniora was unequivocal, blaming Syria directly for FAI. He repeated some of his arguments that he had made to the Ambassador earlier, that Nasrallah's 5/25 speech had led to a "consolidation of public opinion" against FAI. While emphasizing that he hoped military action could be avoided, Siniora asked the UNSC members to ask their

BEIRUT 00000747 003 OF 003

countries to support whatever decision Lebanon must take, "even if we ultimately cannot avoid invading the camp." In this regard, Siniora passed out an official statement regarding FAI (faxed to NEA/ELA), asking that it be distributed to capitals.

RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR WARNS OF INSTABILITY  
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19. (C) While most UNSC ambassadors expressed strong support for the tribunal and for whatever the Siniora cabinet decides regarding FAI, the Russian disagreed, and the Qatari remained silent. Russian Ambassador Sergui Boukin quizzed Siniora at length about what "legal rights" Lebanon had to enter Nahr al-Barid. The Palestinians have "extraterritorial rights," Boukin argued. Siniora disagreed. Whatever extraterritorial rights the Palestinians gained under the questionable 1969 Cairo agreement had been abrogated in 1984 and never restored subsequently, even if the GOL did not push its authority in the camps in practice. Moreover, Mahmoud Abbas provided "carte blanche to do whatever we think is needed." It was "already past time" that the GOL needed to take a stand against the lawlessness in the camps, and the FAT attacks on the LAF "are too egregious to ignore."

110. (C) Boukin responded that the GOL, if it orders an LAF invasion of the camp, puts itself in a "lose-lose" situation. If the LAF enters the camp, it might very well lose the

battle with FAI. And even if it wins, FAI "is everywhere in Lebanon" and will "burn the country." It is an "iron rule of military doctrine" that conventional militaries cannot defeat terrorists like FAI, and Lebanon would be foolish to try. Responding that "doing nothing guarantees the state loses," Siniora asked icily whether Russia had applied that military doctrine to its own fight against domestic terrorism. Boukin then switched to the Special Tribunal, saying that he remained convinced that "we will all regret" a Security Council resolution creating the tribunal. Siniora said that, while he regretted having to resort to asking the UNSC for "what Lebanon should have been able to do on its own," he would regret more the idea that impunity for murder continues to haunt Lebanon.

COMMENT

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11. (S) Siniora was in top form in his meeting with the UNSC members: passionate, organized, even clever at times (such as in responding to Boukin). Remembering how he used his PM perch to good effect during last summer's war, we have often noted that Siniora seems to do better in crises than when the situation is quiet. Of course, he has had much practice in dealing with crises over the past two years. In any case, while the PM is not a military strategist and would have little understanding of whether the LAF is truly capable of winning an outright war against Fatah al-Islam, his political will in standing up to FAI seemed stronger today than we have seen it before. That is good news.

FELTMAN